



SENSATION

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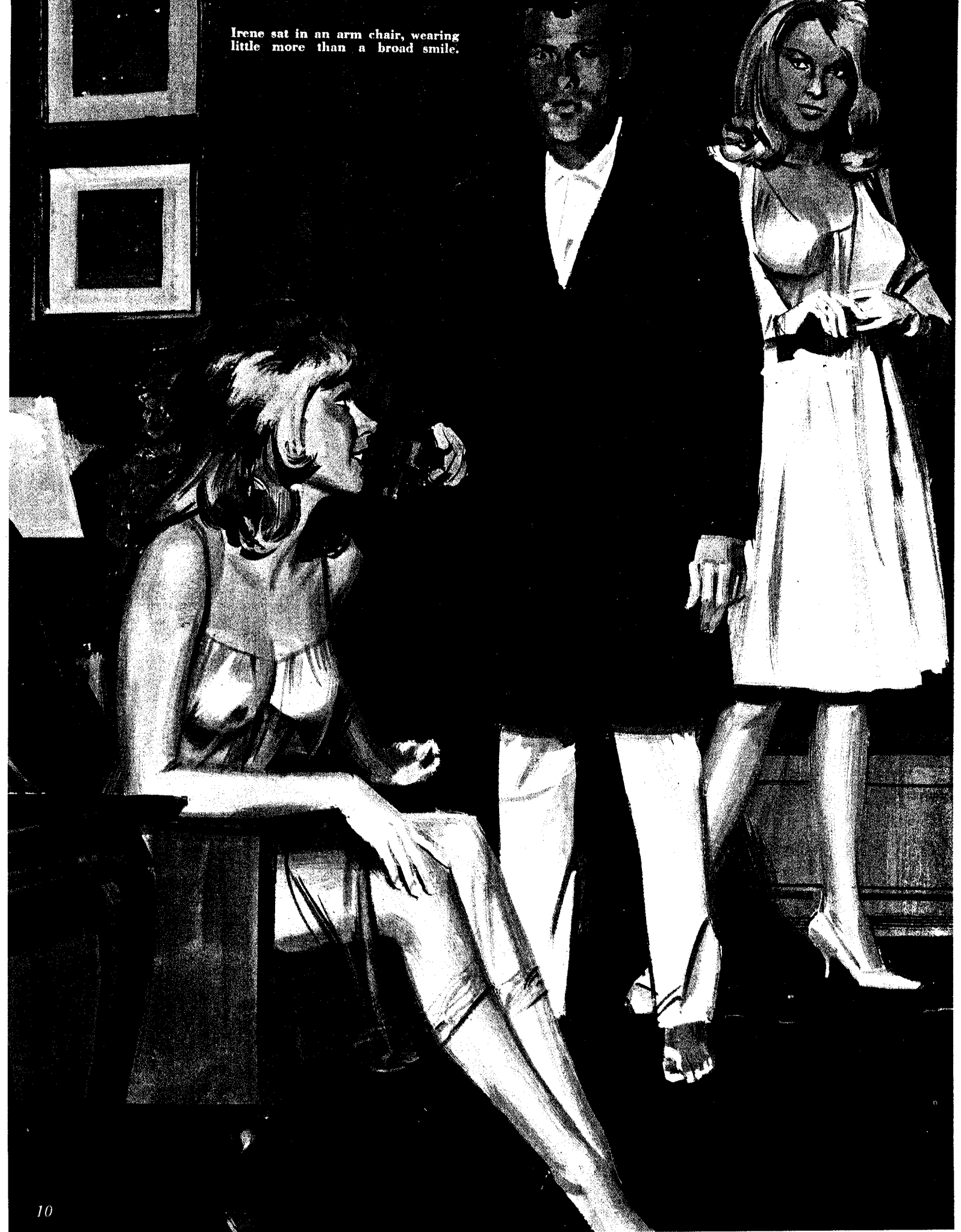
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Irene sat in an arm chair, wearing
little more than a broad smile.





THE TROUBLE with GEORGE

Someone had gotten the habit of trying to shoot George's head off; George got nervous. He even suspected the butler!

By Jack Ritchie

"Are you a private detective?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Then why does it say *Matt Hewitt, Confidential Investigations* on the door?"

"I'm going to have that scraped off," I said. "He used to have this office, but somebody shot him between the eyes. I'm a lawyer and I just moved in."

Her eyes flickered over me. "Perhaps you'll do at that. Anyway, I've just *got* to tell somebody all about it."

"Why?"

She smiled briefly. "Because I

am a woman. And everybody knows that every now and then we've got to sit down and tell somebody all about it." She took a cigarette out of a silver case. "It all started when I shot my first husband. It was an accident, of course—at one hundred yards, with the wind approximately nine miles from the west."

"How long was the happy marriage?"

"Six months. Ralph was quite rich and I had no money, so naturally my friends are positive that he *bought* me. We were target shooting at our country place when Ralph went ahead to check my score. I

shot five 5's, and, of course, my husband."

I folded my hands. "So here we have the situation: You accidentally shot your husband and apparently got away with it. Naturally there was at least one witness to corroborate your story?"

"Yes. My sister."

I nodded. "Family loyalty is a touching thing."

She exhaled smoke in my direction. "I shot my first husband three years ago. I shot my second one last night."

I waited.

"George went to the city yester-

day, and he said that he would stay there overnight. I went to bed at about ten. It was close to midnight when I was awakened by a noise downstairs. The servants have their own wing, and they had retired at nine. Our place is comparatively isolated, so our fear of intruders is somewhat accented. I took the revolver from the night stand and went downstairs. I saw a shadow in the hallway and fired. It was George."

"It would seem to me that you have come to the right place after all. You need a lawyer."

"No. George was only slightly wounded and he is a gentleman. He says he believes my story absolutely."

"And I suppose he hushed up the incident?"

"Unfortunately, Bronson, our butler, heard the shot and phoned the police." She rubbed her forehead for a moment. "While they were there, George happened to mention that someone had fired at him last week too. Missed completely that time."

"It wasn't you?"

"No. George believes that it was some trespassing hunter."

"Still you suspect he's beginning to wonder. Especially in view of what happened to your first husband. And you want to hire a private detective to prove to George that last week's shot really was the work of a careless hunter?"

"Yes."

"That would seem to me an almost impossible task; even for the best of detectives. Your phantom hunter might not admit shooting at George, or even know that he did. And more than likely he can't be found at all."

She sighed. "I can't think of anything else."

I studied her for a few seconds. "What is your name?"

"Pamela Wesley."

"Suppose you invite me to dinner at your place tonight?"

She smiled faintly. "Are you better than the best of private detectives?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I have the ego to try."

At the Wesley house that even-

ing, Pamela introduced me to her husband. "George, this is Peter Masters, an old friend I haven't seen in years."

George was a tall, languid man whose right hand was bandaged. He extended the other. "I'm a southpaw temporarily. My wife shot up the other one."

"Must have been unnerving."

He nodded. "Came home around midnight. Unexpectedly, I'll admit. Opened the front door and here was this ambiguous figure in the darkness of the hall pointing a gun."

"It was light enough to see that much?"

"Just about," he said. "My key chain light caught the glint of the barrel. My first thought was that I had stumbled upon an intruder and so naturally I immediately raised my hands. The very next moment I was aware of a shot fired in my direction and a sharp pain in my hand." He coughed slightly. "I suppose it wasn't the courageous thing to do, but I bolted—right back out the front door."

"But eventually you returned."

"Yes. When the squad car pulled up the driveway I decided I might as well go back."

A violet-eyed woman resembling Pamela had appeared in the doorway while he spoke.

"This is my sister, Irene," Pamela said. "She's been staying with us the past two weeks."

Irene had a slow smile. "George wasn't hurt seriously. Just a gash on the back of his hand," she said.

After dinner, I found myself in a corner of the drawing room talking to Irene. "Your sister seems to be rather careless with firearms."

"I suppose so," Irene said. "But accidents will happen, won't they?"

"Of course," I said. "It's been three years since her first husband died, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

"I believe the papers said the rifle happened to be leaning against a tree and Pamela stumbled against it?"

"No," Irene said. "It slipped from her hands and discharged."

George came over to poke up the fire. "Frankly I'm still embar-

rassed about running. But I'm getting a bit gun-shy. This is the second time in a week that somebody's taken a shot at me."

He returned the poker to the stand. "I happened to be walking on the north end of our property when suddenly a rifle bullet whistled past my ear. I suppose it was a careless hunter. We always seem to have a few of them trespassing during the quail season. I looked for him, but he'd disappeared."

"Are you positive it was a rifle shot?" I asked.

"Yes. I recognize a rifle when I hear one. Why?"

"People don't hunt quail with rifles," I said. "They use shotguns."

He shrugged. "Perhaps he was hunting for something else."

"By the way," I said. "My bags are still in my car. Could you have somebody take them to my room?" I turned to Pamela. "It was really nice of you to invite me for the weekend."

Pamela smiled slightly. "George, will you have Bronson take up the bags? I'll show Peter his room now."

Upstairs in the corridor, Pamela said, "So you brought your bags? Thoughtful of you."

"A calculated impulse," I said. "How long have you been married to George?"

"Five months." She stopped and opened a door. "This is your room."

"Very comfortable," I said. "I've been thinking, Pamela, and it seems to me that dropping a rifle, having it go off accidentally, and nailing a man dead center at one hundred yards is quite a feat."

"If you'd like some more lamps," Pamela said, "I'll have Bronson bring some up."

"No, thank you. And so we are presented with two alternatives," I said. "Either the death of your first husband was an incredible coincidence, or you shot him deliberately."

She looked at me. "And what do you think, Peter?"

"I think that if you had shot him deliberately you would have marched to the nearest police station and said: 'I shot him, and the dirty dog deserved it.'"

"You fancy yourself a judge of my character?"

"I think I could be insufferable on the subject."

"Have you considered the possibility that I shot Ralph for his money? In that case I certainly would not have marched down to the police station and confessed all."

"In this present enlightened century, it is no longer necessary to shoot husbands for their money. An intelligent woman like you could easily have divorced him and left him trembling and ragged."

"And so we must accept the coincidence?"

"No," I said. "There is another possibility."

She eyed me carefully. "Yes?"

"There is the possibility that your sister shot your first husband."

"I think we can go back downstairs now."

"If you had seen her deliberately shoot Ralph, I am certain that you would have called the police. Sister, or no sister, you wouldn't condone murder."

"My character again?"

"Yes. Therefore, I submit that you did not actually see the shooting. Perhaps you weren't even in the area. But when you did arrive, you found your sister holding the gun and chattering about the dreadful accident of it all. And since she was your sister, you desperately wanted to believe that it was an accident."

"Are you through?"

"A few more shingles," I said. "But even with your volunteered corroboration, why couldn't *she* take the blame for the 'accident?' Obviously she had a motive for shooting Ralph. Was there something between them? Did she kill him because he rejected her?"

Pamela's eyes flickered. "Do you realize that you are building all of this on sheer speculation?"

"Perhaps," I said. "And so, whatever the motive, the two of you finally decided that it would be wiser for you to take the blame for what you wanted to believe was an accident."

A tall, broad-shouldered man in a butler's uniform appeared with my suitcases.

"Just put them beside the bed, Bronson," I said.

Pamela and I walked back down the corridor.

"The servants retire at nine," she said. "However if you need any-

thing, just rap on that door over there."

"Your room and George's?"

"Mine. His is at the head of the stairs."

During the course of the evening, I found myself alone with Irene again.

She studied me carefully. "You said that you and Pamela were old friends? I don't believe I've ever met you before."

"It hasn't been necessary," I said. "Pamela was able to take care of all the arrangements."

"Arrangements?"

"Of course," I said. I sipped my drink. "I'm flying down to Rio next week and I rather think that this time I shall remain there. So I've decided that it would be more convenient to settle now for a lump sum, rather than the monthly payments."

"I'm sorry," Irene said, "but I'm having difficulty following the conversation."

I frowned slightly. "Don't tell me Pamela's never even told you about me?"

"No."

I smiled. "I've been blackmailing Pamela for three years now. You see, I just happened to be on the grounds when her first husband was killed. I had dropped over to see how Pamela enjoyed being married."

Irene's face became expressionless. "It was an accident."

I chuckled tolerantly. "My dear girl, when one puts a rifle to one's shoulder and deliberately aims . . ."

The violet eyes stared at me. "You saw that?"

"Yes."

"And you've been blackmailing Pamela?"

"Yes."

She reached into the cigarette case on the cocktail table. "I don't believe you were there at all."

"Why not?"

She lit the cigarette. "Pamela's not paying you another cent."

"Suppose I drop a note to the police?"

"Anonymous?" She smiled. "Then it would be just a piece of paper and no more. And I hardly think you would expose yourself as

a blackmailer and as a man who has kept silent about murder for three years."

At eleven, I retired to my room, but my thoughts kept me from sleep. It was nearly twelve when I heard the shot.

I slipped quickly into my robe and went to the door. Except for the rectangle of light from the open door of George's room, the hall was pitch black. A moment later the lights flashed on.

George stood at the hall light switch, one hand holding the left side of his neck. Blood trickled through his fingers.

Pamela's door opened, and she appeared in the doorway.

George gazed at her reproachfully. "Pamela, I wish you wouldn't continue doing things like this!"

She moved toward him. "George, you're *bleeding*!"

"I don't think it's anything serious," he said. "I can still swallow." He stared at her for a few seconds. "However, I think I'm going to call the police."

Irene came out of her room. "You seem to lead nine lives, George," she said.

A bath-robed Bronson came running up the stairway carrying a revolver. "I thought I heard a shot."

George studied him. "That isn't at all surprising, since you seem to be closest to the weapon."

Bronson looked at the gun. "I found this at the foot of the stairway."

George frowned. "I suppose you've muddled all the fingerprints. If someone was careless enough to leave any." He took the revolver from Bronson. "You appeared rather fast. How does it happen that you were in this part of the house at this hour?"

"I remembered that I'd forgotten to close some windows, sir."

"Just exactly what did happen here?" I asked.

"Well," George said, "I was reading when I heard a rather faint tapping at my door. So I got up and opened it and bang—another bullet."

"I suppose you didn't see who it was?" Irene asked.

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"No. The hallway was dark and whoever shot at me apparently retreated fifteen or twenty feet before firing."

"Pamela," I said. "Where did you say you kept your revolver?"

"In my night table," she said.

We followed her into her room and she opened the drawer.

"It's still here," she said. She revolved the cylinder. "One bullet has been fired, but that was last night. I didn't reload. Would anybody care to sniff the barrel, or something?"

George stood at her vanity mirror peering at his neck.

Pamela moved beside him. "Let me treat that for you."

His hand went back over the wound. "If you don't mind, I'll take care of this myself." He stared at her again and then smiled. "Ticklish, you know."

George returned from the bathroom a few minutes later with gauze taped to the side of his neck. "Frankly, if I were positive it was Bronson, I would call the police immediately."

Bronson drew himself up. "I could report that to my union steward."

"But on the other hand," George added, "if it was a member of the family, it requires some thinking. I wouldn't want to hurt anybody's feelings."

He went to his bedroom door. "I'm going to lock myself in. I will not be available to anyone who taps."

In the morning I questioned George in his study.

"When you entered your home the night before last, you faced the person you believed to be an intruder and raised your hands?"

"Yes."

"And your wife fired at you?"

"Yes."

"You recognized her?"

"Well, no. But she admitted it."

"And that neck wound last night, who do you think did that?"

He rubbed his jaw. "I've been giving that some thought. Perhaps it was Bronson."

"Now don't be ridiculous. He's the butler."

"I don't see how that necessarily disqualifies him."

"What motive could he possibly have?"

"I don't know. But suppose he's madly in love with my wife? Maybe he plans to murder me and marry Pamela."

I allowed myself a few moments of thought and then said, "How many firearms are there in the house?"

He shrugged. "As far as I know, just the revolver in Pamela's night table and the one that was used last night. I have that one here in my desk drawer. Also, there's a deer rifle in the closet over there."

I went to the closet, pulled out the cased gun, and checked it. "Where do you keep the ammunition?"

"On the shelf right above."

"Does everyone in the house know about this rifle and the ammunition?"

"I suppose so. It's no secret."

I turned from the closet. "Suppose we make it convenient for your potential murderer to get another shot at you?"

He looked a bit pained. "Personally, I'm rather against that."

"At dinner tonight," I said, "you will announce that you have suddenly been called to the city for an important conference, or something like that—and that you will not be back until one in the morning."

"Why that late?"

"Because by one o'clock the house should be asleep, and the person who's been taking shots at you will feel safe. He will undoubtedly sneak down here to the study and wait at an open window with this rifle. I noticed that you don't have automatic garage doors; and there will be no moon tonight. So the ideal time to plink you will be when you are standing in the headlights of your car while you're unlocking the doors."

He cleared his throat. "Has it ever occurred to you that this time Bronson might not miss?"

I smiled. "The rear sight of this rifle is adjustable. I merely turn this screw one-quarter of a turn to the left, and I estimate that the bullet should pass about three feet to one side of you—considering the distance from here to the garage."

"Suppose he decides to use one of the revolvers instead?"

"I'll take that revolver in your desk and secretly confiscate Pamela's revolver. That to make you feel more at ease. He'll have to use the rifle."

"And you will be here to catch him in the act?"

"Precisely."

He touched the side of his neck. "I don't think it's going to work."

That evening George left the house at approximately nine.

I retired to my own room at eleven, but, of course I didn't sleep. At twelve, I put a revolver in each one of my pockets and stole down the stairs to the study.

The room was pitch black. I felt my way carefully along until I touched a lamp and an easy chair. I crouched down behind the latter, ready to rise at a moment's notice and switch on the light. I waited.

The hall-clock chimes struck the quarter hour, and then the half.

There was a faint click of the study door opening, and then, half a minute later, the sound was repeated; but this time from the direction of the closet door. I could hear the sound of someone fumbling with the cartridge box, and then the click of the bolt being slipped home.

Another minute of silence followed, and then I heard the window being raised.

I still could see nothing, not even the figure that must be waiting at the window. All was quiet again.

The hall clock struck one shortly after George's car pulled into the long driveway and proceeded to the garage.

I heard his brakes as the sedan stopped before the garage doors.

When George got out of the car and stepped into the glare of his headlights, the rifle at the window cracked sharply.

I switched on the lamp and pointed one of the revolvers. "Well, Irene," I said. But I stopped my sentence short, for it was not Irene at the window.

Pamela stared at me for a moment, and then put down the rifle. "Hello, Peter." She took off

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her gloves and stuffed them under the cushion of a chair. "It's my word against yours. We heard the shot; we ran downstairs to this room, and found the rifle on the floor. We saw no one."

I was still astounded, but I shook my head slowly. "Really, Pamela, I'll admit I'm fond of you, but I think you're expecting too much."

Pamela smiled. "Would you prefer me to say that I dashed down here and found *you* at the window with the rifle?" She raised an eyebrow. "Motive? You were insanely in love with me and determined to kill my husband so that you could have me. Isn't that right, Irene?"

"Quite right, Pamela," Irene said. "You can count on me."

I turned.

Irene sat in an arm chair wearing little more than a broad smile. It was evident that they had both entered the room together. Perhaps they had even drawn straws to see who would get to use the rifle.

Minutes later, George burst into the room clutching his head. His face was white. "Somebody shot at me and I got creased. I thought you turned that damn screw a quarter-turn to the left?" He looked at me. "Who was it?"

I glanced at Pamela and Irene for a moment and then sighed. "I don't know. I fell asleep upstairs and didn't wake until I heard the shot."

Pamela moved slowly toward George. "You poor dear," she said. "You've been incredibly lucky so far. But somehow I have the weird feeling that whoever has been shooting at you won't miss the next time."

George fainted.

The door to my office opened, and Pamela walked in.

"Are you Matt Hewitt, the internationally famous private detective?" she said with a smile.

I rummaged through my pockets until I found my penknife and went to the door. I began scratching at the lettering, beginning with the word *Investigations*.

"There's no need to be depressed," Pamela said.

"I am not depressed," I said firmly.

She watched me work. "George didn't even wait to pack his bags before he left. He phoned me this afternoon and said that he wants a divorce, and I can name the grounds. He wouldn't even tell me where he's staying."

"I don't blame him; he probably wants to live."

She took a cigarette from her case. "Irene and I have been talking things over, and we thought that perhaps you ought to know what's been going on."

"I am quite *aware* of what's been going on. You simply happen to be a lousy shot."

"But I'm not." She smiled. "I aimed several feet to George's right. How did I know that you had been fooling with the sights?"

I frowned and stopped scratching at the letters. "You really didn't mean to crease him?"

"No." She lit the cigarette. "I think it all started the night I mistook George for an intruder. I fired over his head. But as George was sprinting across the lawn an idea suddenly came to him. In the garage he deliberately gashed his hand and came back to the house claiming that he had been shot."

I looked at her. "What makes you so positive he inflicted the wound himself? He claimed to have had his hands above his head when you fired."

"To tell the truth, I couldn't see well enough to tell if he had or if he hadn't. But anyway, according to his own words, he was facing me with his hands over his head when I shot. In that case he could have been wounded on the *side* of his hand, but certainly not the *back*."

I attacked the letter "v." "Why didn't you bring that to the attention of the police when they came?"

"Because it made no impression on me at the time, and possibly never would have. But then I began thinking about a lot of things when George received his neck wound and wouldn't let me dress it."

"Self-inflicted *again*, I suppose?"

"Of course." She met my eyes. "Peter, if someone shot at you deliberately, wouldn't you call the police?"

"Yes."

"George had intended to, but then

suddenly he changed his mind. Why?"

"I'm *not* a detective," I said stiffly.

"Because when he looked into the mirror in my room, he suddenly realized that there were powder marks on the wound. And I noticed them too. But he had just claimed that whoever had fired at him had been at least fifteen or twenty feet away."

I sighed. "And I suppose no hunter shot at him either?"

"Probably not."

"But what was the purpose of all this apparent masochism?"

"My money, of course," Pamela said. "After a few more attempts at his life, he could probably have had me put away in an institution. Especially in view of my past history."

"But you *did* deliberately shoot at George at the garage, didn't you? Or near him, at least?"

She grinned. "As a form of self-defense. George is not exactly the bravest lion in the world. I suspected that if he thought that somebody—especially me—was *actually* trying to kill him, he might decide to abandon his scheme in the interests of continued inhaling and exhaling. I happened to be right."

"And I'm always wrong," I said bitterly.

There were several seconds of silence, and then she said, "Not always!"

I looked at her. "Name one instance in which I was right."

She looked away.

I blinked. "You don't mean that my theory about what actually happened three years ago was correct?"

She went to the ash tray on my desk and ground out her cigarette. "Well, I suppose I ought to be going."

"Why?"

She looked up. "Why not?"

I folded the penknife and put it back in my pocket. "Of course, it's up to you now," I said. "But I've already stated my case. In a moment of stress I said that I was fond of you. I'm inclined to understate."

She met my eyes and slowly smiled.

I wondered how long it would take George to get that divorce.

